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Tackling Sectarianism in Scotland

Michael Rosie, Cecelia Clegg, Ian Galloway, Margaret Lynch & Duncan Morrow

Abstract

The Advisory Group on Tackling Sectarianism in Scotland (AGoTS) was established in August 2012 to provide Scottish Ministers with impartial advice on how to develop and assess work to tackle sectarianism in Scotland. Key to the Group's work was understanding the forms that sectarianism may (or may not) take in contemporary Scotland, and how best to address these. This article sets out an overview of the Group, as well as outlining the key contours of this Special Issue of *Scottish Affairs*.

Keywords

Sectarianism; Public Attitudes; Marches/parades; Social Structure

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Duncan Morrow, Director of Community Engagement at the University of Ulster, has a long record in community relations in Northern Ireland, leading the Community Relations Council from 2002-2011 (see, e.g., Morrow, 2012). He is chair of the Scottish Government's Advisory Group on Tackling Sectarianism

The Advisory Group on Tackling Sectarianism in Scotland (AGoTS) was established in August 2012 by Roseanna Cunningham MSP, then Minister for Community Safety and Legal Affairs, to provide Scottish Ministers with impartial advice on how to develop and assess work to tackle sectarianism in Scotland. The Group operated independently from the Scottish Government and was given a free hand on determining relevant topics and contacts. Key to the Group's work was understanding the forms that sectarianism may (or may not) take in contemporary Scotland, and how best to address these. The Group met over 51 formal sessions, with dozens of additional meetings, conversations, and observational visits (e.g. to football matches, parades, project events, theatre performances). It advised Ministers on funding applications, and on how funded projects should be evaluated for their impact (see, e.g., Voluntary Action Fund, 2014). The Group published an interim report on its activities and independent advice to Scottish Ministers in December 2013 and submitted its final report in May 2015 to Paul Wheelhouse MSP, current Minister for Community Safety and Legal Affairs (AGoTS, 2013; 2015). Membership of the Group was designed to span a varied background of understanding and tackling sectarianism, as well as incorporating members from Catholic, Reformed, and non-faith backgrounds. The Group was also given superlative support through the Scottish Government's Community Safety Unit and Justice Analytical Services¹.

Through the work of the Advisory Group and, not least, in its discussions with a very wide range of individuals and organisations – including charities, churches, community groups, educationalists, local government, MSPs, parading bodies, police, youth organisations - it became clear that there were three broad aspects of social and political life in which sectarianism might operate (see AGoTS, 2015):

In the creation, underpinning, and reproduction of inequality and discrimination (what the Advisory Group convenor, Duncan Morrow, came to describe as *glass ceilings*);

In the justification of threats, intimidation and violence (Morrow's *glass bottles*);

In the creation and reproduction of persistent suspicions or antagonisms which foster prejudice, hostility and resentment (Morrow's *glass curtains*).

Central to the Group's work was to assess – and make more accessible – the existing evidence on sectarianism in Scotland, as well as identifying priority areas for the extension and deepening of the research base. It might be noted at this point, that the Group's brief was 'intra-Christian sectarianism', though it consistently acknowledged that other forms of intolerance – religious, ethnic, or otherwise – tends to bleed into and out of 'sectarianism'. In practice, too, the sectarianism at issue was that broadly between Scotland's 'Protestants' and 'Catholics'. It should be at least acknowledged, however, that other forms of sectarianism – between Episcopalian and Presbyterian, for example, or within the schismatic history of Presbyterianism itself – have historical purchase in Scotland.

The Group's interim report noted: "The current evidence base on sectarianism is insufficient. We have, therefore, concluded that in-depth research to monitor sectarian attitudes and

¹ The Group would particularly like to thank Andrew Bell, Dave Bell, Stephen Coulter, Mary Hockenhull, Ben Kavanagh, Liz Levy, Linzie Liddell, Rachel Tatler, and Nicola Thomson in this respect.

activity should be increased and attention given to evidence rather than allegation” (AGoTS, 2013: 8). Three substantive articles in this Special Issue of *Scottish Affairs* outline the different independent research projects commissioned by the Scottish Government on the Group’s behalf. The full reports of these projects, taken together with reviews of existing evidence produced by the Scottish Executive and Scottish Government, analysis of religiously aggravated offences, and the interim and final Reports of the Group (AGoTS 2013, 2015; Goodall et al, 2015a; Hamilton-Smith et al, 2015a; Hinchliffe et al, 2015; Justice Analytical Services, 2013, 2015; McAspurren, 2005; Mckenna & Skirvington, 2014) represent a very substantial contribution to our understanding of the nature, complexity, and salience of sectarianism in Scotland.

This Special Issue aims to allow the research teams to give depth and flavour to the three independent research projects (discussed here in Goodall et al, 2015a; Hamilton-Smith et al, 2015a; Ormston et al, 2015), as well as situating them within some of the broader and longer debates around the evidence on sectarianism in Scotland (Rosie, 2015). Finally, David McCrone – who acted as a respondent at the launch of the three research reports in Glasgow in February 2015 – offers a personal overview of where Scotland stands over in its understanding of, and capacity to tackle, sectarianism (McCrone, 2015).

The Issue opens with **Ormston et al**’s discussion of what the Scottish Social Attitudes survey of 2014 can tell us about attitudes towards sectarianism and, further, why understanding public attitudes is crucial. In the absence of “proper understanding of where the public sits on an issue,” they note, “policy makers cannot develop appropriate responses” (pxx). The Survey very clearly shows that the Scottish public see sectarianism as a problem – 88 per cent of respondents saw sectarianism as a problem in at least some parts of Scotland (pxx). The study thus illustrates widespread public concern, but it also unpacks a puzzling nuance. They note that the survey demonstrates that “Many people believe sectarianism is an issue for Scotland However, only a minority see it as a problem where they live, and many people think it only affects specific parts of Scotland” (pxx). Further, whilst sectarianism is “viewed as an endemic and intractable issue”, “relatively few people believe more serious incidences of discrimination are commonplace” (pxx). We thus meet a seeming paradox which runs through the three research projects: for very many Scots “religious discrimination and sectarianism are things that happen in Scotland, but not in their area, and not to them” (pxx).

This is not at all to say, however, that sectarianism exists only in the imagination. It is more complicated than that, and as **Goodall et al** note, “For some [in Scotland], sectarianism is manifestly part of their everyday experience; for others it is almost invisible in their social world” (Goodall et al:xx). In this study, which spoke in depth to communities in various parts of Scotland, it was found that in accounts of sectarianism “Songs, flags, colours, football strips, names and many other cultural signifiers are as important as religion, age, ethnicity, gender and place of residence”. Thus sectarianism “should be conceived of as much as a cultural phenomenon as it is in social and legal terms” (pxx). What was also clear was that sectarianism was not *everywhere*, and not *all the time*. Where respondents did speak concretely about sectarian encounters “they spoke of specific places and times”:

Rather than a patchwork, we might say that what we encountered was a cobweb. The web might be thickest in West-Central Scotland, but even there it is full of gaps. The problem occurs across the country but it seems to run like the scaffolding of a

cobweb, down family histories and along the routes of masculine culture in particular. (pxx).

Thus whilst Goodall et al thought it important to note that there is “little evidence of systematic sectarian discrimination in Scotland”, it was equally important “to emphasise that the impact of experiences varies. If sectarianism is not spoken about, the impact on individual victims may be more severe” (pxx).

This notion of the *episodic* and spatially varied nature of sectarianism links to Ormston et al’s finding that sectarianism can be “A problem – but not where I live” (pxx), and also to the findings of **Hamilton-Smith et al** (2015b). This study of the community impact of marches and parades noted an interesting facet of certain spaces and places ‘associated’ with sectarianism, “Only at specific moments might certain locations suddenly become laden with [sectarian] meaning and association”. Intriguingly, such “subtleties of meaning may be entirely lost on the uninformed observer, or indeed may be entirely irrelevant to residents most of the time”:

... what marked these transitions from what might be termed ‘sympathetic’ to ‘hostile’ to ‘sympathetic’ spaces, was not any clear concentration or segregation in housing, but the symbolic association between certain places and certain ethno-religious and political loyalties. (pxxx)

Hamilton-Smith et al note some fascinating challenges in assessing “community impact” of events widely perceived by the public as contributing to sectarianism (notably, Ormston et al: xx found that 79 per cent of respondents felt Orange parades contributed to sectarianism, whilst 70 per cent thought the same of Irish Republican marches). The nature, temporality and extent of such impact was difficult to grasp, as was ‘community’ in any precise or meaningful sense. Crucially they conclude with a conundrum: given widespread claims that such events are ‘sectarian’, and the vehement denials of organisers that they are any such thing, then which perspective should frame policy responses: “the gaze of the onlooker or what lies in the heart of the participant” (pxxx)?

The final substantive chapter, contributed by **Rosie**, seeks to put the preceding articles in a wider and longer evidential context. It does so by situating sectarianism within three broad areas. Firstly, there is now a very consistent research finding that whilst many Scots view it as a noxious and worrisome problem, experience of sectarianism is often described in terms as happening to someone or somewhere *else*. Rosie highlights a painfully under-used study of Glasgow from over a decade ago which illuminated “a stark contrast between perceptions of prevalence [of sectarianism] and reports of experience” (NFO Social Research, 2003: 59) Likewise in terms of Scotland’s social structure (*life chances*), widespread stories about sectarian discrimination are not borne out by identifiable patterns of disadvantage, not least in terms of occupational structure. As Rosie notes, we now have an unprecedented amount of robust socio-economic data in Scotland and yet “evidence to substantiate systematic religious disadvantage (let alone sectarian discrimination) has proved remarkably elusive” (pxx). Finally we now have very considerable and consistent evidence that in terms of the more personal and intimate aspects of Scottish life (*life choices*), sectarian divisions seem less

important or determining as they might appear. For many Scots being Protestant *and* being Catholic are part of their own intimate mixture of friendship, family, and love: “Religious conflict with ‘the Other’ – indeed the very conception and relevance of ‘Other’ – becomes difficult to sustain when it is one’s partner, father, sister, or child who ‘kicks with the other foot’” (pxx).

Nevertheless, as Rosie concludes, there is a very substantial and consistent body of evidence to demonstrate “social anxiety” around sectarianism, and that “Perceptions, in other words, *matter*” (pxx). For McCrone, drawing on the work of Michael Sandel (2010) in the reflexive piece that concludes this Special Issue, tackling prejudices requires us “to engage with what we do *not* believe in; to listen and respond to the counter-view, to take it seriously. It needs patience, understanding and time (pxx). Sectarianism, in this respect, has to be understood alongside “other forms of social prejudice and discrimination, such as racism, chauvinism (including gender), and even anti-Englishness”:

We recognise that these are variant forms of ‘the politics of difference’, that is, who we are and who we are not. If we do not think of the politics of difference in the round, we run the risk of inhabiting different social and cultural silos without thinking through how they might connect with each other. (pxx)

As McCrone concludes, tackling sectarianism within a broader assault on prejudice, intolerance and discrimination “is neither easy, nor mealy-mouthed liberalism. This is hard politics, the politics of difference” (pxx).

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